THE DISCONNECTIVE POWER OF DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGNS

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Abstract: This paper argues that one of the major purposes of a disinformation campaign is to sustain a discursive conflict between users of social networks. By examining the phenomenon of "unfriending," the paper describes how disinformation campaigns sabotage horizontal connections between individuals on either side of a conflict and strengthen a state's capacity to construct an image of an external enemy. The paper argues that horizontal connections are targeted because they have the potential to mitigate social cleavages, challenging state control over the legitimacy of a conflict narrative. Understanding disinformation campaigns as a technology for the facilitation of social polarization and the destruction of strong social ties allows us to rethink policies for addressing the role of fake news, especially in the context of a conflict. The paper highlights the need to develop tools that defend users from engagement in manipulative discursive conflict and protect cross-conflict social capital as a resource for potential conflict resolution.

In March 2018, I met the developer of the Ukrainian Fakes Radar project, Dmytro Potekhin. Dmytro was driven by the idea of developing some sort of "anti-virus" that would alert social media users to "fakes" on his or her news feed. This would allow a user to make his or her friends aware of their role in promoting fake news. I asked Dmytro if he thought people really wanted to engage with friends who distributed fakes. In some cultures, people seek to avoid political discussion to minimize risks to their social ties. Potekhin responded by saying that the struggle against fakes requires this sort of direct engagement. I asked, "But whose interest might it serve? Perhaps those state-affiliated actors that create fakes want to not only spread false information, but to destroy social ties between people." I was suggesting that accentuating claims of fake news would only serve to exacerbate tensions among friends on a social media platform. My argument seemed to puzzle Dmytro, but his eventual response was profound: "Fake news

actually kills. So perhaps that's a proper price and some social ties need to be destroyed." The point of this article is to describe the costs associated with this approach to fighting disinformation.

Many scholars and practitioners often consider counter-fake initiatives the most effective remedies for combatting disinformation campaigns. I take a different view. Developing effective policies to address the increasing role of informational fakes requires a more critical understanding of the social role of disinformation. Counter-fake initiatives could worsen the negative effects of fakes by highlighting the contest between orthogonal versions of reality. Well-intentioned anti-fake campaigns might lead to a greater fissure in social relations online, just as fact-checking, by restating a falsehood, can deepen the likelihood of the falsehood's embrace by motivated reasoners.[1]

This article considers how disinformation campaigns advance the political goals of state actors involved in conflict. It argues that the way fake news undermines liberal democratic institutions and norms does not necessarily deal only with the notion of truth. It suggests that the impact of disinformation should be examined in the context of the social relationship between people who read, respond to, and share news in a situation of conflict.

The social nature of fake news

So-called fake news or disinformation is usually understood as a tool "to shape perceptions and actions of domestic and international audiences," according to Khaldarova and Pantti. At the same time, they highlight how the purpose of fake news is also "supporting already-constructed identity claims, rather than reporting on events."[2] Bennett and Livingston suggest "caution in adopting the term 'fake news'" and argue that the notion of "disinformation" allows more systematic investigation of the "disruptions of authoritative information flows." They define disinformation as "intentional falsehoods spread as news stories or simulated documentary formats to advance political goals."[3]

Other scholars highlight how fake news is more accurately thought of as a social phenomenon. Tandoc Jr. et al., point out that "fake news is co-constructed by the audience" whereas "meanings are negotiated and shared."[4] While in the past, traditional media—as the space of news consumption—had been separated from the space where people discussed the news, the interactive nature of social networks has offered a new type of information environment where the proliferation and consumption of news is not separable from interaction around news. In this way, news is embedded in interpersonal interaction, while reading, sharing, and commenting are elements of news consumption.

A number of notions highlight the participatory nature of disinformation. This

includes the notion of "peer-to-peer propaganda" as a situation in which "ordinary people experience the propaganda posts as something shared by their own trusted friends, perhaps with comments or angry reactions, shaping their own opinions and assumptions."[5] The notion of "crowdsourced information warfare" highlights how the response to disinformation campaigns relies on the digitally mediated mobilization of a crowd's resources.[6] As pointed out by Tandoc Jr. et al., "the power of fake news lies in how well it can penetrate social spheres."[7] Bakir and McStay highlight how fake news can be considered "affective content" that provokes emotions including outrage.[8] Understanding fake news as an outcome and driver of interaction between users of social networks suggests shifting the focus of analyzing the role of disinformation from a specific event to the social consequences of emotional engagement. A consideration of the social media dynamics in Russia and Ukraine following the Russian annexation of Crimea illustrates this point.

Conflict-related news in social networking: The case of the Russia-Ukraine conflict

Since the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, the Russian internet has been filled with online battles over the interpretation of Russia's role in the conflict in Ukraine. In many cases people decide either to unfriend each other, or at least to limit their presence on social networking websites.

"I opened my Facebook feed. I have never seen so much pain and desperation," said a user describing her feelings following the annexation of Crimea. Another user said that every time she went online she did not want to live anymore. In light of the omnipresence of the conflict in newsfeeds, some users tried to reduce their own engagement with social networks. A well-known Russian journalist declared a self-imposed ban on writing any Facebook posts about politics in order to "get some fresh air."[9]

While digital escapism is one of the ways people exclude themselves from news, a more common response is remaining on a platform while excluding previous friends. Following the downing of MH-17, one Facebook user wrote, "Today, I have unfriended more people than I did at the apogee of the Ukrainian crisis. Both sides. For a total loss of humanity." In some cases, people unfriended others on the basis of their liking specific pages. For instance, one user shared that he found the Facebook page with a title "Polite People. Russian Military," and unfriended 21 friends who liked this page. At the same time one of the users wrote that she was proud that she had not unfriended anyone: "So far, I haven't deleted from my friend list any victim of this information war." She, and others, wondered if unfriending was a proper solution, because it meant giving up on efforts to persuade others.

A research project on unfriending practices in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict concluded that "unfriending was more prevalent among more ideologically extreme and more politically active Facebook users." In addition, "weak ties were most likely to be broken."[10] In the case of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, however, evidence suggests that the conflict has had a robust impact on previously strong apolitical ties among people, including ties between relatives, classmates, and friends. One user complained that "the most unpleasant thing about this information struggle is that even the best of friends suddenly start to publish absolute trash." Another user shared his frustration with his friend's lack of media literacy. Friends from both sides of the conflict shared fake news, and the comments on fake news posts often turned into vitriolic exchanges. In some cases, users learned through these exchanges that they had already been unfriended. For instance, a user shared an experience of visiting the profile of an old friend and discovering the presence of a lot of Russian patriotic imagery, as well as the fact that he was no longer a friend. He concluded, "Thank God I am not a friend anymore. Goodbye."

Online friendships among former classmates seemed especially vulnerable. One Facebook user reported that she had unfriended two of her classmates because of their position on the situation in Crimea. Another Facebook user shared an experience of a close friend blocking her page because of her position on the conflict. In response, she said, "I never said anything bad to you, though it was very painful for me to read your posts since the war started. Does it [unfriending] mean that human relations end at the border that is crossed by tanks from your country?"

Users cut ties even with intimate relationships because of different positions on the conflict. One user described a romantic encounter as part of her relationship with a Facebook friend. However, she wrote that she had decided to unfriend him following his post on the Ukrainian events.

Some users also describe seeing a transformation of the Russian-speaking social networking environment in the shadow of the conflict. One user wrote, "Russian Facebook is so aggressive that it seems people are divided into two groups: friends and enemies, though there are more enemies than friends." Another user shared her concern: "It seems that everyone's gone crazy. People seem to think that unfriending someone because of his opinion is normal. It looks like an information civil war." One user highlighted the gap between everyday, offline life and conflictual, online space: "There is so much hatred on the Internet, and it's so easy to get infected by it, to start to classify anyone as either friend or enemy." Some users warned their friends: "People, take care of each other. You think you just share your negative emotions online. Actually, you're destroying each other's minds, you're entering a circle of verbal violence that also manifests in offline life."

The stories offered above offer an alternative view of the role of fake news. While Russian-speaking social networks are full of discussions about the Russia-Ukraine conflict, one of the most sensitive topics is how people respond to what their friends share, not the content of the news. Controversial news has a substantial impact on social structures and can lead to the destruction of even relatively strong social ties between people. The following section describes how disinformation campaigns operate to achieve this type of impact on social ties.

Social categorization and disconnective power

According to John and Dvir-Gvirsman, unfriending can be "a mechanism of disconnectivity that contributes to the formation of homogeneous networks," or, in the words of Ben Light, a manifestation of disconnective power.[11,12] Unfriending is a process of "ingrouping" and "outgrouping," where the subject constantly revises which individuals belong to the ingroup—his or her social group—and which are alien agents belonging to an outgroup. This process of social inclusion and exclusion relies on social categorization. Shkurko highlights that, "social cognition is fundamentally categorical [and] we perceive others and regulate our behaviour according to how we position ourselves and others in the social world by ascribing them to a particular social label."[13]

The distinction between "ingroup" and "outgroup" in online social networks often relies on the positions users take with regard to a specific topic, especially when the topic is politically sensitive or controversial. This may include personal posts about a specific subject and the acts of sharing, liking, and commenting on the news or posts by other users. In this light, the consumption of information on social networks from newsfeeds relying on a circle of friends is related to the constant revision of boundaries between the ingroup and outgroup. The consumption of news on social media is a process whereby the "other" user is considered in the context of his or her relative position on a specific issue.

The question, however, is to what extent a position on a specific issue can be significant enough to trigger the process of inclusion or exclusion. In some cases, users do not reconsider their close ties despite the existence of political controversies, but the illustrations in the previous section suggest that positions with regard to the Russia-Ukraine conflict are best thought of as drivers of social categorization that provide a basis for ingroup/outgroup distinctions. The conflict shapes the structure of classification and produces categories that differentiate between various users. In this situation, users tend to reconsider their social ties on the basis of positions taken with respect to the conflict. The vulnerability of apparently strong ties suggests that the role of a conflict-related classification is more dominant in shaping social structures than are shared experiences that used to

unite these groups.

Fake news contributes to the transformation of social-networking newsfeeds into a field of discursive conflict where people engage in conflict-related communication that shapes their social circles. Disinformation campaigns that appeal to emotion and constantly insert controversial news items into newsfeeds contribute to the increasing impact of conflict-related social categorization on social ties. So-called "fake news" can be a tool that drives the process of ingrouping/outgrouping formation.

In this light, disinformation campaigns are a manifestation of the state's disconnective power. The purpose of these campaigns is not to shape people's perceptions about reality, but rather to dissolve horizontal ties among people by increasing the impact of conflict-related social categorization. The constant flow of state-sponsored disinformation triggers and sustains the phenomenon of "unfriending" as an outcome of conflict-dominated social categorization. Disconnective power helps shape people's identity through the artificial development of information cocoons.

Conclusion

The engagement of users in a constant state of online conflict can be a form of political control by the state. As conflict becomes embedded in a structure of personal relationships, important horizontal social bonds fracture. This manifestation of disconnective power allows a state to shape users' individual identities by diminishing the impact of horizontal connections that threaten the state's monopoly on framing the conflict and challenge the state's ability to affect perceptions of the conflict's legitimacy. In this way, disinformation campaigns sabotage horizontal connections between different sides of a conflict while strengthening the state's capacity to construct an image of an external enemy.

Discussions on remedies to address disinformation campaigns often focus on battles related to perceptions of reality. This paper highlights the need to shift the focus from how events are represented to how relationships among people who have differing versions of reality are affected. What must be protected is not the predominance of a particular message or source, but rather the capacity of people to distinguish between political controversies and personal ties. That said, the externalization of conflicts from within a structure of personal relationships seems too ambitious as a goal. Given the current reality of an information environment that integrates general news with personal interaction, such a separation would be artificial. Therefore, the question is how to make personal relationships less vulnerable in the face of the digitally mediated convergence of everyday life and conflicts. In general terms, lessening the salience of a social categorization that relies on the position of individuals with regard to a conflict could help achieve

this goal. This suggests a need for a set of defense mechanisms that would protect horizontal connections between those who have different opinions on a particular controversial issue.

First, if there are online debates that pose a threat to horizontal connections, one way to avoid disconnection is to introduce a third actor able to show those engaged in the debate that there is a way to deal with controversy without destroying social ties. A conceptual foundation for this type of practice exists in the field of discursive psychology, and specifically in the concept of "narrative mediation." Kure highlights that the externalization of conflict requires us to develop other possible modes of relationship—new discursive fields—between the individual and the conflict or the individual and other individuals. In this context, the role of a narrative mediator is to "constitute a new discursive background that does not fit into the events of the dispute and opens for less polarizing and marginalizing positioning practices."[14]

A second approach argues that the protection of horizontal connections can rely on a platform's technical features. Unfriending or blocking can be affordances of disconnection offered by social-networking websites, which simplify disconnection by offering a symbolic gesture that signifies the breaking of a tie between two individuals. Offline practices of social disconnection that communicate a symbolic meaning of unfriending, such as a refusal to shake hands when in a situation of physical proximity, seem more complicated and difficult than a simple click. Features affording new forms of digital support for the protection of social ties could help mitigate the simplification of digitally mediated disconnection. For instance, some kind of digital "yellow card" issued by one user to another to alert them when an online discussion is entering a phase where it may threaten the social connection between participants and to raise the question of whether continuing the debate is worth paying the price of "disconnection."

Finally, increasing awareness of the potential risks of online communication can enhance people's capacity to distinguish between political controversies and personal ties. According to Beck, the rising number of risks in modern society is linked to the increasing role of reflexivity in addressing and handling these risks.[15] An increasing reflexivity regarding the role of social media means exposing how state actors use online disinformation to serve their political interests. Making users more aware of the nature of disconnective power would contribute to safeguarding their own social circles. Strengthening people's personal sovereignty regarding their own social worlds, while emphasizing cross-conflict social capital as a potentially potent resource for conflict resolution, can help combat the manifestation of state sovereignty as a vertical intervention in horizontal connections.

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NOTES

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9 All quotes collected by the author.

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